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ABSTRACT

On the premise that a variety of reading and writing activities will help students develop their thinking skills, this paper offers seven class activities intended to encourage the development of formal and advanced thinking in junior and senior high school students. The activities, intended as basic activities which teachers can adapt to their subject, age group, and learning environment, are as follows: (1) Oral Book Report: Television Talk Show; (2) Listening/Responding to Music; (3) Students Teaching a Concept; (4) Editing an Article; (5) Writing an Additional Scene for a Book; (6) Reading Journals; and (7) Personality Profiles and Interviews. For each of the activities, general goals, objectives and procedures, and assessment are described. (SR)

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Activities for Encouraging the Development of Formal and Advanced Thinking in Junior High and Senior High School Students

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To students, reading assignments may at times seem boring and completely irrelevant to their lives outside the classroom; writing tasks become something dreaded and dull. However, if planned well, class activities involving reading and writing can become extremely beneficial and enjoyable to nearly any kind of student. However, these tasks need to go beyond the teacher relaying to her students the basic information required of her. Activities must have true developmental worth and be challenging, yet capture the interests of both students and teachers. If education is intended to help children develop into mature, capable, thinking adults, assignments and activities should have the potential for developing in the students an interest in learning and a sense that they can improve and grow.

In order to determine what types of activities are beneficial to developing students' thinking abilities, it is necessary to define what is characteristic of advanced or mature thinking. Some aspects of formal thought, based on Jean Piaget's formal operations stage, are as follows (for an explanation of Piaget's stages of development, see Flavell, Miller, and Miller, 1993):

1. Hypothetico-deductive reasoning
2. Understanding of highly abstract concepts
3. Reasoning about relationships between propositions
4. Applying mental operations to the future as well as to the present

Flavell et al (1993) suggest that achieving formal thought also involves advances in metacognition, self-monitoring and self-regulation in learning, scientific thinking, and greater information-processing capacity. Nickerson (1985) further described a formal thinker as able "to see the interplay of ideas and actions" (p.32). He suggested that an advanced thinker should not be dependent on stereotypes, but should be aware of the need to observe the situation and to search for evidence.

According to studies by researchers such as Flower and Hayes (1980), Marzano (1991), Nickerson et al (1985), and Tierney et al (1989), reading and writing do seem to be beneficial in helping a child progress towards more advanced or more formal thought. Upon analyzing the aspects of attention, cognition, and other processes involved in the activities of reading and writing and comparing these with the more commonly recognized aspects of advanced thinking, it seems that there is some relationship between exposure to good reading and writing activities and one's ability to think abstractly, logically, and formally. Commeyras (1989) explained that "...the rationale for using literature to teach critical thinking rests on more than the claim that analyzing literature can be interesting. It rests on an understanding that critical thinking is an integral part of the reading process and that it makes sense to hone one's critical thinking abilities using all kinds of materials including literature" (p.704).

One of the best ways to help students grow and develop is to be aware of and take into consideration the fact that they are individuals who are different from one another and who have experienced life in different ways. It is also important to keep in mind that there is no one "best" way to write in response to reading; there are benefits and costs to each possible activity (Flower 1990, p.59-60). In order to help students develop their thinking, the "best" solution would be to practice a variety of reading and writing activities and to help them learn when one kind may be more beneficial than another.

Based on these considerations, I have composed a list of activities that may be helpful in encouraging the development of formal and advanced thinking in junior high and high school classes. Some of the activities are based on the research and the insight of educators, administrators, researchers, and specialists; other activities are my own creations. These activities are intended to be a springboard to teacher creativity in helping students develop cognitively. They should serve as basic activities which an educator can then adapt to the appropriate subject, age group, and the learning environment.

Oral Book Report: Television Talk Show

Based on a suggestion of Madeline Myers in Simmons and Deluzain (1992)

General Goals: allows for students to experiment with perspectives, improves their role-taking abilities, encourages a higher level of analysis of literature (characters, plot, and setting)

Objectives/Procedure: A group of 6-8 students will present an oral report in the format of a TV talk show, lasting between 15 and 25 minutes. Each participant will contribute to the audience's understanding of the novel and its various aspects. The presentation must not exceed or be less than time indicated and the participants must speak clearly and loudly enough for all the class to hear and understand. Students should keep in mind that the show is intended to develop the audience's interest in the novel. Objectives for each type of participant are as follows:

Host: One host will introduce the interviewees, ask meaningful and leading questions, provide structure to the interview by having an interesting and relative introduction and conclusion to the show.

Author: One person portraying the author will provide a brief summary of the plot (one or two sentences perhaps) as well as provide relevant information pertaining to the author's life or to the background or situation of the writing of the novel.

Characters: At least two students portraying characters from the novel will be able to discuss the questions decided upon previously by the participants of the show. Try to let the audience see the main personality traits and perhaps some of the pecularities of the characters.

Advertisers: Two brief commercials will be presented during the show, regarding products or services the students decide are related to the novel or the time period in which it is set. Commercials should be only about 30 seconds each; costumes, backgrounds, etc. are up to the students to decide if they are needed.

News anchors: One or two students will present a brief news announcement (30 seconds to 1 minute) pertaining to at least two significant events in the plot or involved in the setting of the novel. They may involve relevant historical events or persons, or fictitious events or persons in the novel.

Assessment: Presentation must be within the time limit specified. Show should flow well, and all participants should be audible and understandable. Subjects presented should be appropriate and interesting; main ideas and characters of the novel should be addressed so that the audience has a good sense of what the novel is about without knowing all of the plot. Each of the elements could be graded on a scale, ranging from a zero to a five, with five being excellent and zero being very

poor or not included.

As an additional form of assessment and student involvement, the audience could be provided with a checklist to rate how well the performing students communicated the main ideas, the relevance of the commercials, etc.

* * *

Listening/Responding to Music

General Goals: learn personal use of writing for expression of emotion, memories, and ideas; see the association of language with music, emotions, scenery, etc.; understand somewhat the importance of relating our experiences to others and the variety of ways this can be achieved

Objectives/Procedure: Students will listen quietly to a piece of music, focusing their attention on what the music makes them feel, see, remember, think about, etc. They will then jot down any ideas, phrases, emotions, scenes, etc. that came to mind while they were listening. The students will then discuss their experiences in small groups of 3-5 students each, comparing how others experienced the music to how they experienced it. The class will then listen to the piece one more time, adding any additional comments or ideas on the reverse side of their previous notes. The students will then be given about 20 minutes to write a paragraph or two describing their own experiences. This may be a simple description of their emotions

or a memory or scene that came to mind, or it could be described as a story they "saw" in their mind, or it could even be depicted in a poem or simple drawing. If the students would like extra time, the assignment could be turned in the next class period.

Assessment: This assignment should not be given a letter grade. It is an opportunity for the students to experiment with their own thoughts and responses, and should be read only by the teacher unless the student would like to share it with others. The responses should show some personal ideas and reflections and must be at least a paragraph (if written in prose). In addition, you may not want to tell the students the title of the piece until they have listened to it, so as not to influence their impressions of it.

Some suggested pieces of music (activity is not intended to be limited to these pieces):

-"Hoedown" from Rodeo, Copland -Moonlight Sonata, Beethoven

-"One O'Clock Jump" Count Basie -"Clair de Lune" Debussy

-Prelude to Act III of Lohengrin, Wagner

-Etude no.12 in c minor, op.10, Chopin

This activity could eventually be used as an initial step in a creative writing task. Notes and ideas generated could be the basis of a story, description, poem, etc. If this activity works well in the class and the students enjoy it, it could be done about once a week to initiate a short writing exercise.

* * *

Students Teaching a Concept

General Goals: learn concepts well, develop an appreciation for the teacher, take on the perspectives of both learner and instructor

Objectives/Procedure: Students will define for the class in their own words a literary concept as a presentation, giving at least three examples and three non-examples, differentiating it from other literary concepts. The students may use visual aids if they think they will be effective. The presentation should take about 7-10 minutes, depending on how quickly the other students understand the concept (may be up to 20 if necessary). After explaining the concept, the student will question the other students about their understanding; ask them to provide additional examples and non-examples. Time should be allowed for any questions they might have. After the presentation, peers will write a brief response (1-2 paragraphs) regarding their opinions of the presentation. Explain in a sentence what the concept is. What are two examples or non-examples? Do you have any more questions? How could the presentation have been clearer or more effective? What were the strong points of this lesson?

Assessment: Student's definition and examples must be accurate and clear. Three examples and three non-examples must be provided. The lesson must be within the agreed upon time limit.

The majority (perhaps 70%) of the peer evaluations must show an understanding of the concept.

Example of how this could be assigned points:

Correct definition	15 points
Six ex's/non-ex's	7 points
Correct examples (3pts. each)	18 points
Within time limit	5 points
Peer evaluations	5 points
	50 points total

Some suggested concepts (activity need not be limited to these):

-science fiction	-hyperbole
-metaphor	-part of speech
-stream of consciouness	-part of sentence
-assonance	-simile

* * *

Editing an Article

General Goals: improve revision skills, increase vocabulary and self-confidence in grammar/language control, practice perspective-taking, identify main ideas

Objectives/Procedure: Students will read in class on their own a magazine or newspaper article selected from those provided by the teacher. They will then write a brief summary of 1-3 paragraphs, depending on the length of the article. Without altering the basic ideas they have summarized, the students will revise the article, making any corrections or improvements they feel are necessary. Note any sentences or paragraphs that do not contribute to the main ideas, or any place where more information would be helpful.

In the case that an article seems to need little revision, students could rewrite the article for an audience different from the one originally intended. For example, an article taken from a science magazine could be revised for a sports magazine. Or an article from a fashion magazine could be rewritten for a business-oriented newspaper. Another possibility would be to change the purpose of the article, such as changing from a persuasive to an informative article, or vice versa.

Regardless of how they choose to revise it, students must keep in mind what the type of audience for which the article is written, and how much background knowledge the audience will have on the subject. It would also be helpful to make a list of any words the student does not understand. The revised articles should then be shared in small groups for suggestions from other students. The revised article will then be turned in for a grade, either a pass/fail or a grade based on correctness and improvements to the article.

Assessment: Students must turn in all drafts, questions, improvements, and a copy of the original article. Some effort to improve the vocabulary and grammar must be evident. The student should make at least two suggestions as to how the article could be improved.

* * *

Writing an Additional Scene for a Book

Based on activities from Jackson (1983), and Simmons and Deluzain (1992)

General Goals: increased understanding of motives, actions of a character or person; forming hypotheses; synthesizing opinions and available information; creativity!

Objectives/Procedure: Based on their understanding of the characters, students will write a brief scene involving at least two of the characters. The scene may be a continuation of the novel, a prediction of how things may turn out in the future, a scene that could have happened in the story, or any other situation that lends itself to the characters personalities and/or lifestyle. The main characteristics of each person should be evident, and the language or speech should be appropriate to the characters and the situations. Students may request to perform their scenes, and the teacher will select which will be performed. (This may depend largely on how much class time can be devoted to the activity.)

Assessment: Each student will contract individually with the teacher regarding the length, style, number of characters, etc. to be involved in the scene. Various other grading criteria may be decided upon, thus grading techniques will vary greatly for this activity . The scene should be graded on the basis of the contract, and not in comparison with the work of the other students.

This activity could be used with a broad range of short stories, novels, and even poems. It lends itself well to any piece of literature that has life-like characters with several aspects to their personalities.

* * *

Reading Journals

Based on suggestions of Benton and Fox (1985), Jackson (1983), and Simmons and Deluzain (1992)

General Goals: analysis and review of events, formations of hypotheses and predictions, evaluation and synthesis of significant elements and events

Objectives/Procedure: During the process of reading a novel or story, students will record a journal entry responding in any way they feel appropriate. Each entry should be dated, and should be at least 1-2 paragraphs in length. Entries should be made at regular intervals, decided beforehand based on the structure of the piece of literature (every chapter, every 15 pages, daily, etc.). Some method of organization should be considered, but is not the main concern. The journal is intended to be based on personal responses to the readings, and entries will remain confidential between the student and the teacher unless the student volunteers to share them in class discussions.

Some suggested types of responses include:

--Predict what will occur in the next section of reading or in

the rest of the book. Give reasons for your hypothesis.

--Explain why you think one of the events you have read about will be significant to the rest of the story. Support your theories with examples from the text and from how it has progressed thus far.

--Jot down your first impressions about the passage you have read. This may be in the form of lists or phrases, and may include feelings, memories, associations, predictions, etc. Discuss any impressions that have changed over the course of your readings.

--Discuss the development of one of the characters. How has your impression of him/her changed? Has the character changed? Describe some aspect(s) of his/her personality that impressed you or stood out to you.

--Comment on how the author presents the action, the characters, the setting, etc. What methods does he/she use? Do these methods change?

--Compare what you have read to your own experiences. How would you or did you respond to these situations? How are the events different or similar to those in your life?

--Discuss what you think is the theme of the book or story. Based on this what can you predict will happen in the rest of the story or the events? What supports your opinion about the main theme?

--Research something in the reading that was of interest to you. Describe briefly in your journal what you learned. Does this

change your impressions about the story or novel?

Assessment: A set number or a range of entries should be decided upon before beginning. Class time may be needed at first for the students to understand how and why a journal should be kept. Journals should be recorded on a regular basis, and turned in to the teacher at regular intervals. Teacher responses to the journal entries should not be evaluative, but should instead be conversational. Teacher questions and notes in the journals should encourage the students to explore their own responses to the readings.

* * *

Personality Profiles and Interviews

Based on a project by Beyersdorfer and Schauer (1992)

General Goals: begin to develop an understanding of adult motivation, improve role-taking abilities and perspective, practice decision making skills

STEP 1 Critical thinking about literary characters

Objectives/Procedure: Students will practice identifying in writing at least three aspects of a character's personality, supporting their generalizations with one or more examples from the text. In class discussions, students will speculate about a character's motivations, supporting their hypotheses with evidence. Students should analyze the character's appearance, speech, actions, etc. In addition, students will read a

newspaper or magazine article about a contemporary "unique individual" of their choice. Each student then will generate a list of questions that could be asked of that person. After practicing these activities, the class will make a list of personality qualities to be used in step two of this activity.

Assessment: Each student will hand in (1) a list of three aspects of a character's personality with examples for each, (2) a list of questions that could be asked of the interviewee along with the information about the article read--author, title, etc. These assignments could be given letter grades, but are intended more as a benefit for the other steps of the activity.

STEP 2 Decision making

Objectives/Procedure: Each student will make a list of possible candidates for interviewing. Candidates should be at least 21 years old, and a broad range of people should be considered (coaches, religious leaders, relatives, friends' parents, family friends, etc.). The student will then select one who seems most interesting to them, and identify some of his/her personality qualities from the list created in class. Each student should then make an appointment for the interview to take place.

Assessment: Students should turn in (1) the list of possible candidates, (2) the list of personality qualities. These lists need not be graded, yet handing them in will keep the students from delaying the project until the last day.

STEP 3 Interviewing

Objectives/Procedure: Keeping in mind their previous knowledge

about the person, students will develop a list of 5-10 questions for the interview. These should be leading questions requiring elaboration or explanation, rather than simple "yes" or "no" answers. It is best to choose questions that will evoke memories, yet questions should not be offensive or likely to bring up painful or touchy subjects. It might be helpful to let the class watch interviews such as on "60 Minutes" or read interviews in magazines and newspapers to get a better understanding of what questions are more appropriate. Once the student has decided upon questions to ask, the questions should be categorized by topic and in sequential order if possible, then written one question to a page so they will have plenty of room for notes and follow-up questions during the interview.

The interview will then be conducted out of class, and should last at least 15 minutes. Students should begin with positive, non-threatening questions; be flexible and ask follow-up questions when necessary; and end with a question that would make a good conclusion to the profile (for example, what is an important event in his/her life? what is his/her philosophy about life? what is one favorite saying?). It would be best if the student received permission from the interviewee to use a cassette recorder or video recorder during the interview. Once the interview is completed, the student should add any additional notes as soon as possible so as not to forget anything. If the interview was recorded, it should be reviewed so the student can add to the notes.

Assessment: The list of questions should be turned in and checked for appropriateness and quality. Teacher should respond to which questions are better than others, and which ones might need to be rephrased or thrown out. A class discussion may be needed once the lists are returned so students have a better understanding interviewing topics and questions.

STEP 4 Presenting the personality profile

Objectives/Procedure: In class, the students will review individually their interview notes to determine events, speech, or gestures that demonstrate specific personality qualities. Any quotations that are especially relevant should be marked. Non-verbal behavior should also be consider in describing the person. In small groups of three to five, students will share their responses to the interviews, discussing the main aspects of their personalities and their evidence for their opinions. One their own, students will then work to compose a thesis statement about the person that will capture the audience's attention, name the person, and express their feelings about this adult. Notes and records of the interview should be used to develop a draft of the personality profile about 2-3 pages long.

After the written profile is complete, students will then create an oral presentation based on the interview. There are several ways this could be done:

--use portions of the written profile for oral presentation

--display a treasured item to illustrate a personal quality of

the adult

--share sections of the taped interview, such a story or event that was retold

--role play the interview with help from another student

--reenact an important event in the adult's life

--write a story based on the person's life; this would not necessarily have to be presented orally

Regardless of what method is selected, each student should submit to the teacher in writing what they intend to do for the presentation. The length of each presentation could be the same for each student, or could be decided upon by the teacher and the student.

Assessment: The written personality profile should be graded as other papers are graded. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar rules should be followed. It should be within the range of 2-3 pages (or any other determined length appropriate to the students' level). The paper should have a clear thesis statement and should be organized according to this main idea. The presentation could be graded on a pass/fail basis, or given a grade if a list of required elements is made. In giving their presentations, students should speak clearly, know the information fairly well (it should not be read unless it is a story!), and stay within the time limit.

It would be beneficial both for the students and the teacher to develop a timeline of the project, including the dates the specific assignments are due, what will be worked on during

classtime, and what must be done on the students' own time. This project could be simplified greatly, particularly if the students have already had practice analyzing characters' personalities or interviewing someone. This project could also be expanded to included several other mini-projects, including practice interviews with peers and school faculty, short papers analyzing a character's personality, or discussions on how the interviewer's previous knowledge affects the questions he/she asks. The length of this project depends largely on how much time must be spent on other activities in the class. However, at least 2-3 weeks should be allowed since the student must arrange an out-of-class interview and since there are several steps involved.

* * *

Conclusion

These activities may not fit each educator's personality or teaching preferences. Teachers differ greatly in what they enjoy and in how they are comfortable teaching. Also, not every group of students will respond in the same way to an activity. When planning any activity, one must also consider the many factors involved in a student's learning environment, both internal and external. Some internal factors to consider are:

1. Age of the student--is the subject matter appropriate and interesting to this age?

2. Individual abilities and interests--what do you know about the student's activities, hobbies, previous academic success, etc.?
3. Individual identity and autonomy--how ready and willing is the student to take responsibility for what he or she is going to read or write about? Is the student able to recognize problems and solutions on his or her own?

Also of great importance are factors external to the individual, such as the subject being taught and the nature of the reading and/or writing task. Other considerations should be time constraints; interaction among students in the classroom; current events, from small scale such as in the school or classroom to a much larger scale such as nationally or globally; and the educational backgrounds of the individual, such as previous teachers, instructional methods used, and subjects studied.

Because of the differences in students' learning, the learning environment, and classroom interaction, activities may need to be adapted somewhat to be more appropriate. These activities I have compiled can be used as described or be used as frameworks to which educators can apply their own teaching styles as well as the interests and abilities of their students.

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